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In Focus

How Europe's U.S. Allies Assess the SALT II Pact

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While the Carter administration's SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union has a large contingent of critics on Capitol Hill, most of the United States' European allies seem at least willing to accept it, if not to support it with enthusiasm.

European attitudes toward SALT are by no means unanimous, and many reservations remain. But a recent survey of European attitudes toward the strategic arms limitation treaty suggests that while the allies are concerned with how SALT II might affect their own defense, most believe they can safely support it or live with it.

Following are reports from three European capitals:

WEST GERMANY

The Bonn government, which had profound reservations about the SALT treaty, has shifted to a position of solid support.

In part, the switch was due to U.S. assurances on two points considered vital by the government of Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. The Carter administration pledged that the treaty would not limit deployment of the cruise missile and that the protocol to SALT II would not prevent NATO countries from adding non-nuclear cruise missiles to their own arsenals.

At the Guadeloupe summit several months ago, Schmidt came out solidly and publicly in favor of SALT and went so far as to warn that Senate rejection of the treaty would be a major setback for detente.

At last month's meeting of the NATO nuclear planning group in Florida, West German Defense Minister Hans Apel reiterated his government's new position. Final decisions on the particular "mix" of Pershing II and cruise missiles, and how many of the latter should be deployed on submarines patrolling Western Europe's coastal waters, is to be made at the NATO ministerial meeting in Brussels this winter.

Negotiations are expected by then to have led to acceptance of these weapons systems by Britain and Belgium, and, possibly, the Netherlands.

Schmidt's belief in detente was another reason for his switch. He had been highly critical of President Carter's human rights campaign because of what Schmidt saw as its negative impact on East-West relations. A SALT treaty, assuming it did not undermine West Germany's strategic position, would be, a Schmidt aide said, "a confidence-building measure."

BRITAIN

Britain's recently defeated Labor Party government regarded SALT II primarily as a prelude — but a necessary one — to a more comprehensive SALT III treaty. In that sense, it was felt by the government of then-Prime Minister James Callaghan that much of the debate surrounding the details in SALT II could be safely ignored — provided certain key options, such as the transfer of military technology from the United States to its NATO allies, were not prematurely closed.

The new Conservative Party government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is likely to be less enthusiastic and more concerned with resisting any attempt by the United States and the Soviet Union to restrict arms available to the NATO allies.

Thatcher places top priority on extending the British nuclear deterrent into the 21st century and wants U.S. assistance in replacing its aging Polaris missiles. Thus, Thatcher strongly opposes provisions that would attempt to impose a Soviet veto on the transfer of U.S. nuclear technology to "other partners."

In looking toward replacement of its Polaris submarines, Britain is interested in building its own

generation of submarines and in buying advanced U.S. Trident ballistic missiles, topped by British-developed multiple re-entry warheads.

The Conservative Cabinet also wants options kept open so that Europe can obtain cruise missiles and the neutron bomb. Hence, Thatcher is fiercely opposed to a continuation in SALT III of the SALT II protocol that limits the range of cruise missiles to 600 kilometers.

At the NATO Defense Council's recent meeting in Brussels, British Defense Secretary Francis Pym emphasized the urgency of development by the Western allies of a counterweapon to the Soviet SS-20 mobile strike missiles in Eastern Europe. Pym proposed a new generation of medium-range, land-based ballistic missiles to be built for that purpose. Meantime, he said, extended-range Pershings should be deployed in NATO countries.

To encourage West Germany to accept new nuclear weapons on its soil, Thatcher is prepared to consider accepting some of the new U.S. interdiction missiles in Britain. A hint of this was given last week to Schmidt when Thatcher (dubbed the "Iron Lady" by the Soviets) and her foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, met with Schmidt during his two-day visit to Britain.

"The Iron Lady," said a senior Whitehall official, "is in a resolute mood about countering the enormous Warsaw Pact arms buildup and expects her NATO allies to be equally resolute."

FRANCE

Armed with their own nuclear arsenal, the French take pride in what they see as a measure of independence from the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Thus, the French position on SALT, as stated recently by President Valerie Giscard d'Esta-

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ing, is that France is not concerned about what the superpowers decide to do with their own strategic weapons.

Nevertheless, French analysts agree that SALT is important because of the treaty's bearing on European security and hence on the time available to the French government — following a Soviet attack — to unleash its 64 submarine-based and 18 land-based nuclear missiles.

One analyst believes Europe will become a potentially more dangerous zone after the treaty is signed, because the relative nuclear parity that would be established between the United States and the Soviet Union would make the United States less likely to use its ICBMs — and risk massive Soviet retaliation — merely to protect the NATO allies or to avenge a Soviet military incursion.

In French eyes, this makes their independent nuclear force all the more essential — reasoning that may underlie the recently announced decision to modernize France's nuclear arsenal.

Other well-placed French sources are less pessimistic. They argue that the treaty should make a positive contribution to slowing the strategic arms race — provided the U.S. Minuteman missile force does not become vulnerable in the early 1980s to a surprise attack from Soviet ICBMs. Should the Minuteman become vulnerable, this argument goes, the French arsenal will be even more important.

The French have made clear that they will not participate in SALT III negotiations that cover the "gray areas" of nuclear weaponry — the so-called forward-based nuclear weapons systems located in Europe — or that seek to reduce the growing stockpile of nuclear warheads in Europe.

Contributing to this report were Time-Life News Service correspondents William Mader in Bonn, Frank Melville in London, and Christopher Redman in Paris.